

UN rights expert warns of regression on the right to adequate housing in the United Kingdom

LONDON / GENEVA (11 September 2013) – The United Nations Special Rapporteur on housing, Raquel Rolnik, today expressed serious concern about a deterioration in the enjoyment of the right to adequate housing in the United Kingdom. She warned against the combined impact of various official measures, recent and past, that “have eroded and continue to erode one of the world’s finest systems of affordable housing.”

“The UK has had a long history of providing affordable and good quality housing, and it should take pride in having placed this human right at the centre of its policy priorities,” Ms. Rolnik noted at the end of the first visit to the country by an independent expert designated by the UN Human Rights Council to monitor and promote the realization of the right to adequate housing and the right to non-discrimination in this context worldwide.

“For generations, being poor in the UK didn’t necessarily equate to being homeless, or to living badly housed and in permanent threat of eviction,” the human rights expert said.

Unfortunately, Ms. Rolnik remarked, “the system has been weakened by a series of measures over the years, notably by having privileged homeownership over other forms of tenure.” Most recently several reforms to the welfare system topped with cuts in grants for housing provision “appear to compromise the realisation of the right to adequate housing and other related human rights,” she said.

“The so-called bedroom tax has already had impacts on some of the most vulnerable members of society,” the UN Special Rapporteur stressed. “During these days of my visit, the dramatic testimonies of people with disabilities, grand-mothers who are carers for their families, and others affected by this policy, clearly point to a measure that appears to have been taken without the human component in mind.”

The human rights expert acknowledged that times of economic crisis allow for difficult policy decisions to be made, but warned that “international human rights standards on the right to adequate housing clearly call on governments to avoid jeopardizing the protection of the most vulnerable in the face of fiscal pressures.”

“I am also concerned about the conditions of private renters, as the reduction in the social housing stock and the credit downturn, has forced a higher percentage of the population, notably young people, to the private sector, with substantial impact on affordability, location and tenure security,” she said.

“Although there are significant differences between the situation and policy decision-making in England, Scotland, Northern Ireland and Wales, to which I will refer in my final report in more detail, my perception is that some trends are common and deserve further scrutiny from a human rights perspective”, she said. The report will be presented to the Human Rights Council in March 2014.

During her two-week mission, the Special Rapporteur visited London, Edinburgh, Glasgow, Belfast and Manchester, where she met with government officials working on

housing issues, various human rights commissions, academics and civil society. Ms. Rolnik also carried out site visits, where she heard first-hand testimonies and discussed with individuals, campaigners and local community organizations.